



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIALT ARBETE

Handlingsimperativets dilemman

Om frihet och kontroll i socialtjänstens arbete med klienter som använder narkotika

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av

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ABSTRACT

Title: Dilemmas of the imperative for action – On freedom and control in social services' work with clients who use illicit drugs

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This thesis studies social services' work with clients who use illicit drugs. The aim is to contribute to knowledge about how social services' imperative for action – to actively promote change for clients who use illicit drugs – is shaped in practice and balanced against the principle of autonomy. The aim is also to discuss the conditions and implications of social workers' practice, and to show how power is expressed. The material was collected through observations, reflective discussions with staff, interviews and focus groups at three social service offices. Viewing social workers as street-level bureaucrats, the study draws on discourse psychology in dialogue with Foucauldian concepts of power. The analysis shows that social workers' conditions are contradictory and dilemmatic. Individualistic ideals and clients' freedom are highly valued but collide with strategies that can be perceived as authoritarian, when clients are seen as incapable to act in their own good. To handle contradictions, social workers perform substantial legitimacy work. The analysis demonstrates that social workers, when pursuing and justifying their job, engage in a considerable rhetorical and interactional work. When acting to promote change in clients' drug use, social workers normally avoid acting against clients' intention, and rather pursue a strategy that aligns with clients' freedom of choice and aims to shape clients' will to change. In this way, power is made invisible. Finally, the analysis reveals that social workers shape their approaches and strategies towards clients on the basis of how they view clients' drug use with regards to risks, how they perceive clients' morals, and how they assess the expected return-on-investment of the work, rather than on the basis of clients' drug use as such. As a consequence, many clients need to take full responsibility for ensuring that they get the help they might need.